

SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FOR VOLUNTARY PUBLIC ACCESS HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM
STATE OF GEORGIA

BACKGROUND

The Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, to implement the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). The program provides grants to State and Tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately-held farm, ranch, and forest land to make land available for access by the public for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, and other compatible recreation and to improve fish and wildlife habitat on their land. Administrative authority for the program initially was delegated to the Farm Service Agency (FSA). FSA awarded a VPA-HIP grant to the State of Georgia, through the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Wildlife Resources Division (WRD), in 2012, resulting in FSA preparing a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). FSA issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Georgia program in March of 2012.

Beginning in Fiscal Year 2014, the Secretary delegated administrative authority for the VPA-HIP to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Georgia WRD, DNR applied for and was awarded another grant. The NRCS is adopting the FSA 2012 Programmatic EA for the Voluntary Public Access Habitat Incentive Program for the State of Georgia. With the information in this document, NRCS is supplementing that EA to address NEPA requirements for new aspects of the program not addressed in the FSA Programmatic EA.

Through the 2012 grant, the Georgia WRD expanded and enhanced its existing public access program known as the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) program, to provide more opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife watching, and other compatible wildlife related recreation. Georgia used grant funds to expand its WMA program Statewide to enroll more private lands than would otherwise have been possible, and thereby maximize the number of individuals able to use WMAs for recreation. It also afforded more landowners an opportunity to receive payments through the WMA program for opening their lands for public recreation. Additionally, through its Georgia Outdoor Heritage Recreational Access Program, WRD coordinated recreational opportunities for specific population groups, such as youth or individuals with disabilities. Through the Georgia Outdoor Heritage Recreational Access Program, timber companies and timber investment management organizations

were asked to make unleased lands available, in some limited capacity, to provide recreational opportunities. Natural resources based organizations such as Ducks Unlimited, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Quail Forever advertised and promoted the concept of donating an outdoor experience opportunity to their membership.

Georgia WRD now proposes to use the second VPA-HIP grant in the amount of \$993,664.00, to continue enrolling land in the WMA program and offering outdoor recreation opportunities through the Georgia Outdoor Heritage Recreational Access Program. The 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds will be used for the same types of activities as those funded under the 2012 grant, with the exception that some VPA-HIP grant funds will now be used to carry out habitat improvement and/or restoration projects on lands enrolled in the WMA program. This was not the case with 2012 grant funds. As a result, NRCS has prepared this Supplemental EA to analyze the potential impacts of the proposed habitat improvement/restoration activities associated with the 2014 VPA-HIP grant.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose and need for the 2014 VPA-HIP grant in Georgia remains substantially the same as the 2012 grant. As stated in FSA's Final Programmatic EA, the purpose of the Proposed Action continues to be to utilize VPA-HIP grant funds to increase public access and improve wildlife habitat on private farms and forestland in the State of Georgia. The need for the Proposed Action remains unchanged: to increase the value realized by private landowners for wildlife populations inhabiting their property; increase the types and amounts of public access on qualified private land; and to promote wildlife habitat restoration and improvement of watershed conditions on private properties.

PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action:

The WRD proposes to use 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds to expand its WMA public access program to provide the public with more outdoor recreational opportunities including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and other compatible recreational uses on private lands. The primary objective of the Georgia VPA-HIP Program is to increase the number of privately-owned acres available to public access for wildlife-related recreation. WRD's target is to enroll 15,000 to 20,000 acres into the WMA public access program, including 1,000 to 1,300 dove field acres statewide. However, all three components of the Georgia 2012 VPA-HIP grant – expansion of lands open for public recreation under the WMA program; further development and promotion of the Georgia Outdoor Heritage Recreational Access

Program; and habitat improvement projects on lands enrolled into the WMA program – will be promoted, pursued and utilized under the 2014 grant as funds allow. The key difference between the 2012 VPA-HIP grant activities and the 2014 VPA-HIP grant activities is the additional prioritization and use of funds to improve wildlife habitat on lands enrolled in the WMA program. Under the previous grant, landowners received only advice and no financial assistance to make habitat improvements.

No Action: The No Action Alternative continues to be as described in the 2012 Programmatic Environmental Assessment.

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ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The NRCS has reviewed the 2012 EA and has determined that it adequately addresses the environmental impacts related to the expansion of the WMA program and the further development and promotion of the Georgia Outdoor Heritage Recreational Access Program that will occur with 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds. As a result, NRCS is adopting the 2012 EA and supplementing it with this analysis of the additional component of the 2014 proposal, which is to fund habitat improvement projects on lands enrolled into the WMA program. These habitat improvement projects will enable WRD to ensure appropriate habitat exists on enrolled acres and to offer a greater incentive to individuals interested in enrolling lands into the WMA program. This Supplement to the EA focuses on the potential impacts that would result from implementing habitat improvement projects likely to be funded under the 2014 Georgia DNR-WRD VPA-HIP grant.

It has been determined that habitat improvement projects funded with the VPA-HIP grant by the WRD could impact the human environment through:

- Establishment of vegetation, primarily annual grain crops on existing agricultural fields and perennial native vegetation on identified areas, to provide food and cover for identified species of wildlife;
- Manipulation of vegetation by mechanical and chemical means to maintain wildlife openings and early successional habitat; and
- Use of Prescribed Fire and other related practices such as firebreaks to improve forage and habitat conditions.

With respect to habitat on dove fields, specific actions prescribed by WRD and implemented by grantees that could affect the environment include:

- Annual planting of grain crops (i.e. – corn, wheat, millet, etc.);

- Leaving unharvested areas within existing crop fields;
- Providing appropriate foraging habitat for mourning dove;
- Addressing additional habitat needs and targeting soil erosion within areas designated as dove fields by implementing buffering practices (i.e. – field borders).

In addition, financial assistance may be provided for maintenance of existing roads when determined needed by WRD to facilitate safe access to WMA sites, which also has potential to affect the environment, primarily through soil erosion.

All habitat improvement projects would have the primary focus of restoring healthy ecosystems and/or creating suitable habitat for desired wildlife species. As was the case for the landowner assistance provided by WRD using 2012 VPA-HIP grant funds and as described in the 2012 Programmatic EA, a State-employed biologist or other representative will complete a site-specific environmental evaluation (EE) on all proposals for funding of habitat improvement projects on new WMA areas. (See 2012 Programmatic EA page 32.)

A site-specific EE will be completed for all habitat improvement projects carried out with 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds, according to NRCS policies. Additionally, all habitat improvement activities will utilize NRCS Conservation Practice Standards (CPS) that have been adopted for use within the State of Georgia. The Georgia NRCS State Office has consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as required by the Endangered Species Act and based on the resulting programmatic agreement have modified certain conservation practices to avoid adversely affecting protected species. (See Section IV of the Georgia electronic Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG) at http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/efotg_locator.aspx. Each CPS contains information on why and where the practice is to be applied, and sets forth the minimum quality criteria that must be met during the application of that practice for it to achieve its intended purpose(s). Table 1 below provides a list of practices anticipated to be used under the VPA-HIP program along with a brief description of its potential applicability.

Table 1: NRCS Conservation Practice Standards Potentially Utilized Within the Georgia VPA-HIP Program

<u>Practice Standard Name</u>	<u>Code</u>	<u>Applicability</u>
Access Control	472	Exclusion of people, vehicles, equipment, etc. from an area.
Access Road	560	Improvement of existing travel ways to ensure safe passage by WMA users and addressing resource concerns (i.e. – soil erosion).
Brush Management	314	Control of undesirable woody vegetation.
Conservation Cover	327	Establishment of permanent, desirable vegetation.
Conservation Crop Rotation	328	Sequence of crops to provide greatest benefit to mourning dove.

Cover Crop	340	Establishment of annual vegetation following harvest of crop.
Critical Area Planting	342	Establishment of permanent vegetation on high risk sites (i.e. – highly erosive sites)
Early Successional Habitat Development and Management	647	Creation, maintenance and/or enhancement of early successional species of plants to produce desired habitat for target species.
Field Border	386	Creation of permanent vegetated buffers around agricultural fields in order to meet a habitat need or address an identified resource concern.
Fire Break	394	Installation or maintenance of an area free from combustible fuel to facilitate a prescribed fire.
Forest Stand Improvement	666	Manipulation of species composition, stand structure and stocking to meet a desired habitat description.
Forest Trails and Landings	655	Used to provide temporary access for management purposes.
Grassed Waterway	412	Utilize within cropland to carry flow of surface water.
Herbaceous Weed Control	315	Control undesirable herbaceous vegetation.
Prescribed Burning	338	Implementation of controlled burning in order to create desired habitat by manipulating vegetation, controlling level of fuel accumulation, etc.
Tree and Shrub Establishment	612	Establishment of desirable trees or shrubs to meet a specific habitat need.
Tree/Shrub Site Preparation	490	Preparing a site by chemical, mechanical, or other means prior to planting.
Upland Wildlife Habitat Management	645	Used to treat identified habitat concerns in order to enable movement, or provide shelter, cover, food in proper amounts, etc. for desired species.

*NOTE: To access copies of individual practice standards, refer to the Georgia eFOTG (http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/efotg_locator.aspx)

Because all habitat improvement projects to be carried out with 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds will follow NRCS conservation practice standards and will be for the purpose of improving habitat on existing agricultural and non-industrial private forestland, these projects fall within existing NRCS categorical exclusions. Specifically, all projects will fall in one or more of the following categories of actions:

- Planting appropriate herbaceous and woody vegetation, which does not include noxious weeds or invasive plants, on disturbed sites to restore and maintain the sites ecological functions and services;
- Restoring an ecosystem, fish and wildlife habitat, biotic community, or population of living resources to a determinable preimpact condition;
- Undertaking minor agricultural practices to maintain and restore ecological conditions in floodplains after a natural disaster or on lands impacted by human alteration (e.g., mowing, haying, grazing, fencing, offstream watering facilities, and invasive species control that are

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undertaken when fish and wildlife are not breeding, nesting, rearing young, or during other sensitive timeframes); and

- Implementing soil control measures on existing agricultural lands, such as grade stabilization structures (pipe drops), sediment basins, terraces, grassed waterways, filter strips, riparian forest buffer, and critical area planting.

The EE will be conducted to review each site-specific habitat project to ensure there are no extraordinary circumstances that would require preparing an environmental assessment or impact statement to meet NEPA requirements and to ensure all projects are carried out in compliance with all Federal, State, Tribal and local environmental requirements, including but not limited to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the National Historical Preservation Act (NHPA). The site-specific environmental evaluation will be documented on form NRCS-CPA-52, which will be completed according to NRCS policy.

As a result of the NRCS requirement to minimize adverse effects of planned actions on the environment (see 7 CFR 650.3(4)), the consultations that already have occurred and the site-specific environmental evaluation process that will be used, NRCS anticipates that only minor, short-term adverse effects will occur as a result of using VPA-HIP funds to make wildlife habitat improvements as described in this document. In the long-term, early successional habitat will be improved and other benefits described in the 2012 Programmatic EA will be obtained.

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OTHERS????

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